

How I spent my sixtieth birthday

Carmen Sylva

49587.47.5

HARVARD COLLEGE
LIBRARY



THE BEQUEST OF
EVERT JANSEN WENDELL
(CLASS OF 1882)
OF NEW YORK

1918

La. out
4/-



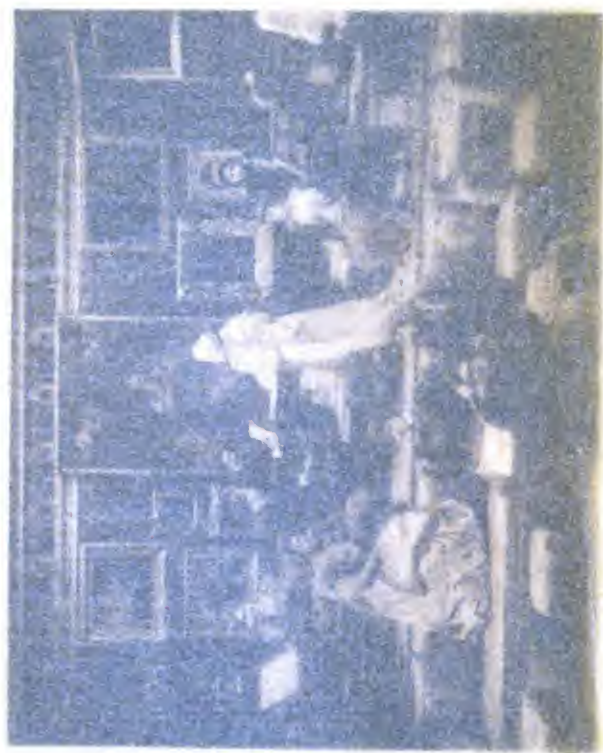
HC

THE HISTORY OF THE
CITY OF OXFORD

TRANSLATED FROM THE
FRENCH OF M. DE LAUNAY BY
J. H. M. J. J. J. J.



1904



0

HOW I SPENT MY SIXTIETH BIRTHDAY

BY
"CARMEN SYLVA"

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY
H. E. DELF



1904

49587.47.5

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY
FROM
THE BEQUEST OF
EVERT JANSEN WENDELL
1919

Elizabeth, queen of Rumania

PENSÉE

"We don't want the world to be good, we
only want it to grow better, and to allow us to
help it thereunto."

—CARMEN SYLVA

HOW I SPENT MY SIXTIETH BIRTHDAY

By CARMEN SYLVA



IT really began in the night; I had just been to a fine performance of "King Lear," the most beautiful of Shakespeare's tragedies, the title role being played by the great tragedian Novelli. It is the same with the plays of Shakespeare as with the quartettes of Beethoven, the last one hears one always likes the best.

This most beautiful of them, "King Lear," did not end until one o'clock in the morning, the theatre in our country only begins at nine, and I arrived home half dead with fatigue, so powerfully had the play impressed me, but before opening the door of my room I heard the sound of music and stopped a moment. I had completely forgotten it was my birthday, the soft tones came from a large musical box which I had once given to my maid, and as I entered, all was brilliantly illuminated. A scent of flowers welcomed me, and amidst them stood my little kittens adorned with red ribbons and flowers, looking very ceremonious and quite conscious of the importance of the moment.

On the table lay the humble presents sent from my own country. The tears came to my eyes, for never more should I receive the presents my mother used to send me. However, they had not forgotten to send me the little calendar I regularly received from her, there was not a word written inside, but I instantly opened it from old habit. It was always the first thing I looked at for it contained a daily motto and verse for the whole year. There too, lay the little knitted slippers sent by the children from the "Otto Foundation," a school founded by my mother in memory of my dead brother, for the education of orphans and deaf and dumb children; and other lovely needlework, worked by loving fingers, a beautiful lace lamp shade, the sides of which represented different musical instruments. I went from one delightful surprise to the other.


But all this time there was no one to be seen, when suddenly my little Swiss girl laughingly crept from under the table, where she had been hiding for at least an hour-and-a-half, that she might not miss the moment of my return, to switch on the musical box. They had quite thought that I should not remember my birthday.

And now I no longer wished to go to bed! When I come home late, I generally sleep on a couch in my room, that the King's rest may not be disturbed, of which he stands in such need, after working himself to death the whole day long. Thus it was of little consequence when I went to bed, so we amused ourselves

with the kittens, and kept on winding up the musical box, that the charm of the moment might not be broken, and when at last I lay down, I had to read for some time before I could go to sleep, it was all so beautiful, as it had never been before. My presents from home, I usually found when I awoke at four or five in the morning, but at one o'clock! After all it was my sixtieth birthday. For forty years it had always been a wonderful event for me, so for once it must begin at one in the morning!

Twice we had missed observing the day, the first time when we were in mourning for my husband's mother, who was dearly loved by me, and who had ever been to me an angel of goodness, the second time for my own mother, who would never more be the first to send me greeting, except in the way she now sends it, by a tender memory in my innermost soul.

But no sad thoughts should now arise, when from the first hour all was so bright.



WHEN I woke the King, I thanked him again for his beautiful present which had arrived, a few days earlier, and could not wait in the cold, a Bechstein piano, my first concert grand. All the artistes who had played here for the last few years, had had to make the best of my old pianos which were becoming

rather worn out. We had already heard what divine tones this new one could produce, for it had been honoured by Emil Sauer's magic touch, so I thanked the King all the more, and said it was really too much. He only laughed and said it was certainly enough. But when I went to breakfast, late of course, for I had to smell all the flowers again, and wind up the musical box, and play with the kittens, their charming little faces looking so pretty with their ribbons, there stood another present, a lovely picture painted by Count Courten, which the King had brought for me in Munich. On presenting it he said "Here, I present you with your dream!" The picture is called "In the Ancestral Hall" and represents a lovely young girl, in a ball dress, standing under the light of a bright lamp, lost in her thoughts. The gallery behind her is dimly lighted by the moon's rays, and in the gloom appears the ghost of a knight, transparent against the background, but still quite distinct, who looks at the girl with loving earnest eyes. It is a highly poetical picture, but my own dream was not less so.

On the 8th of October, 1869, I dreamt I was standing in our old Castle of Neuwied on the Rhine, and that it was all in flames. I rushed into the large hall which is on the second floor, and covered with beautiful carvings and bas-reliefs, and I was lamenting that it must soon be destroyed, when suddenly a black bearded knight appeared in silver armour, mounting the staircase on a black horse, stopped

in the middle of the room, the flames shining upon his armour with a ruddy glow, lifted his vizier, dismounted, and stretching out his hand came towards me. I was much teased about that dream, because I always used to say I would never marry, and fire signifies marriage, and then the knight too ! Only a week later, on the 15th October, I was engaged.

And, when some years later I paid my first visit to Sigmaringen, on entering the large hall, I exclaimed, " But there stands my knight ! " It was really very gallant of the King to remind me of my dream in so tender a fashion. You see, he was indeed a true knight.



BASKETS of flowers had already begun to pour into my room, nearly fifty of them, and all so beautiful. They brought in vases, bowls and dishes to put them in. Then came my attendants who had lived with me since they were fifteen, and who had now become grandmothers, their faces beaming, their hands filled with flowers and lovely work. Afterwards came another surprise, my quartette of musicians, who, instead of flowers, brought me a Beethoven quartette, and Haydn's beautiful quartette " God preserve the Emperor." They sat hidden among the flowers, and whilst they played, more flowers kept pouring in, at last, even a wheel-barrow full ! Formerly one could get but a few poor bunches in Bucharest, now, one might imagine one's self in Nice. Glorious lilacs in pots, lilies

of the valley, carnations, if one could but paint them!

Mountains of telegrams arrived, I really couldn't open them all. The next morning I had already sent off the first hundred and eleven telegrams of thanks, some of which were returned unfortunately, as several people had omitted their addresses.

As yet, I can say nothing of the letters and poems, for there still remain such a number of them, that I shall want a few days to open them all. Amongst them, a letter from Adelaide, Australia, and one from a children's league, the "Sunbeam," a branch of which has adopted the name of Carmen Sylva, also a telegram from Minneapolis. I cannot relate everything, it would be impossible, but the memory of such a birthday lasts for ever, it can never die, neither can the flowers.



EVERYTHING did not happen quite as usual. I generally have a large children's party, all the children and grandchildren of those friends who have been around me for the last thirty years; but I had invited them only two days before, that they might hear the wonderful violinist and composer Florizel von Reuter. This heavenly child has charmed us all, and it is owing to him that I had such a lovely German Christmas. I had a little tree for him, as he had been lamenting the

fact that he would have no Christmas tree this year, for you must know this great musician is but a child of eleven, so I had some presents for him, and received him at the organ. I was going to have sung something, but I thought, how at the same moment in my Castle on the Rhine, they would be singing "Glory to God in the Highest," and my heart was too full and I did not attempt it.

The child flung himself into my arms and clasped my neck, how happy it made me. Then he sat down to the organ and improvised fugues and suites, then amused himself with his presents, and then once more sat down to play. He had brought with him the scores of "Siegfried" and the "Walkure," and played by heart the last opera he had heard in Warsaw, also a symphony he had lately composed. We played his quartette which he had finished during his stay in Bucharest. He plays like a master and is as happy and full of spirits as a child. He is quite alone in the world with his mother, and was born in America seven months after the death of his father, his mother little thought to what a wonderful child she was giving birth. As he stands there bending over his violin, looking like a cherub with his fair curly hair, he reminds one of Fiesole's pictures; and seated at the piano, of Mozart and Haydn, and the tears come to one's eyes.

But the morning was not yet at an end, the Parliamentary Ministers had still to come. Monsieur Sturdza made me a beautiful speech which touched me all the more, as we had

known each other for fifty years. I was a child of eight or ten in Bonn where Sturdza was a student, and he often used to visit my parents who took a great interest in the patriotic young Roumanian.

Soon the whole household arrived, all bringing lovely flowers, the Prince came to lunch and with him our great-nephew Charles, the Princess was unable to come, as she had not yet returned from Coburg with the other children.

The King wanted Charles to drink my health, the child blushed very much and became very confused. He could only whisper "To your health," but he made up for it by the vigorous way he touched glasses.



ON my birthday, there is usually a special performance for school children in the afternoon, children from all the schools in the town, fifteen hundred or more, but this time I had begged that it might not take place, as there is an epidemic of scarlet fever in the town and I considered it dangerous to bring so many children together.

On other days that we commemorate, our wedding day and my birthday, our young genius Enescu has often sent us some lovely serenade, but this time, being so over-burdened with work he was unable to send any new composition and we had to content ourselves with one of his earlier ones.

In the afternoon from 5 to 7.30 I held a

meeting of my big "Society for the Protection of the Poor," one of my numerous societies. It has for its object to find out the very poorest people and distribute wood to them. We have built an Almshouse as well, where the poor and blind can be taken in ; it contains already sixty inmates but has not yet been formally opened. The meeting was all the more interesting, because there was so much good to report of the society, and still better things to carry out, then at the same time, the ladies could enjoy with me, the lovely flowers they had sent me, and they could see how carefully I treated them, to preserve them as long as possible. I have often succeeded in bringing flowers from Monrepos to Bucharest, by putting them in a box lined with damp tissue paper.

Such was the beautiful ending of a beautiful day. This time we dined alone, the King and I. I have so much business to attend to, that I rest when I can. Usually on my birthday, the whole household dine with us, but I was so tired after the meeting, and you must not forget, the day already began for me at one o'clock ! Instead of going to bed at once, which would have been the most sensible thing to do, I had the electric light turned on in my room, called all my attendants, who had been the first to greet me and should now be the last to wish me good night, especially, as amongst them were some from the "Otto Foundation" ; they were so delighted with the lovely flowers, and to see me wearing their little slippers (I never wear any others), then I had to explain

the picture to them. Then the little kittens made their appearance, and wanted to be played with, then I opened more letters and telegrams, until at last I was tired out and went to bed.



SUCH was the sixtieth of my birthdays that I have rejoiced in for the last forty years. In truth I had not expected that loving hands would have rendered it so beautiful for me. Then I only thought of the great peace and calm which reigns under grey hairs ; not of the great love of a life time, of the rich harvest after so much sowing, planting and labour.

That man should linger round his own heart's tomb to scatter sacred flowers thereon, does not make him sad. Alas, from my early childhood it had been my lot to bid an eternal farewell to so many loved ones, to so many dear young faces, that soon I had more friends under the turf than above it. How could it then be otherwise later? But those beautiful verses from Schefer's "Laienbrevier" are so deeply engraven on my heart: "He who cannot live with his loved ones when they are far away, when they are dead, has lost them many times."


The beings we love do not die, if we live for them and let them take part in all we do and all that concerns us. In Monrepos every day, we went to visit the graves of our loved ones, and carried thither our joys and sorrows.

After my engagement, my first visit was to them, so to-day when I go home, my first visit is always to them. Yes, in one of my hours of distress, I was driven there, as I could not walk, and hardly had I arrived when I fell asleep under their protection. It would be sad indeed if the dead were lost to us, for then they would never have lived for us. Then would our life be dreary and empty; the life which should be so rich, so rich in every loving word, in every kind look which one receives.

I don't feel the poorer because those loving arms can no longer enfold me, nor those dear voices no longer sound in my ears, but I thank God every day that I once possessed them, and that I shall possess them to all eternity, at least what we understand by eternity.

Nothing perishes, everything is eternal as long as our brain can retain it.

Life is indeed much more beautiful than we imagine it to be in our youth, it contains so many surprises and difficulties, that later, when we have overcome them, we reckon them among the beautiful things of life, or should do so.



I CANNOT understand how people can talk of the past. Everything is present, everything is here, everything is near. Fifty years do not count, when one looks back, it seems as if hardly an hour lay between. Man is the same to-day as he was when a child of three.

One never changes, not even one's faults, one only tries to make them bearable to others, but there they always are and must be daily battled with.

We must not forget that with others, as with ourselves, most faults are but the reverse side or the exaggeration of good qualities, and if we love not a man with his faults, then, we do not love him at all.

I wish I could thank all those who have sent me so many lovely poems, letters and telegrams, by sending them some of the perfume of the flowers which fills my room and my heart.

Like great waves, testimonies of affection come to me from all parts of the world ; and my sacred cell is bright and warm and shines with the reflection of all one has lighted therein, and echoes with the songs of all one has sung therein.

A thousand thanks to all far and near. A thousand thanks to all who have given so much thought and care to make my sixtieth birthday beautiful beyond all expectation. God has gifted me with a beautiful and vivid imagination, but I have always found that the reality far surpasses the imagination.

From my earliest childhood, I have always looked forward to this day, and now the happy memory of it will remain with me until my death. Is not that happiness enough ?

A Happy New Year to all those who remembered me.

Bucharest, 1st January, 1904.



This book should be returned to
the Library on or before the last date
stamped below.

A fine of five cents a day is incurred
by retaining it beyond the specified
time.

Please return promptly.

W12
CANCELLED
JUN 17 1988
MAY 30 1988
2699656

49587.47.5

How I spent my sixtieth birthday /

Widener Library

002965857



3 2044 087 190 054